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ABSTRACT

Community college professors have a responsibility as teachers to help students learn the many new words which must be added to their high school vocabularies if they are to be successful. While some instructors provide students with a list of jargon words relevant to a particular course, most ignore the problem posed by new words encountered in reading assignments and merely assume that students will look them up in a dictionary. Yet even if students had the time to look up as many words as necessary to understand their reading assignments, few would be able to determine which of the various definitions for any given word is relevant to the passage they are reading. As a result, many words will appear to students as gibberish and render reading assignments meaningless. Therefore, it is incumbent upon instructors to provide, where possible, paragraph-by-paragraph vocabulary guides for each text, listing short definitions for key words. In addition, instructors can improve student vocabulary by: (1) requiring students to learn 50 new words relevant to the course; (2) instruct students in the meaning of prefixes; and (3) help students use and recognize context clues, such as punctuation, definitions in context, the part of speech of a particular word, chapter titles and other visual signals, key words (i.e., "previously" or "in addition"), and footnotes. The report includes examples of each technique. (JP)

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TEACHING CONTENT AND IMPROVING VOCABULARY: YOU CAN DO BOTH!

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Teaching Content and Improving Vocabulary:
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Most college professors assume without thought or question that students' vocabularies increase tremendously while they are in college. This is to be expected as they gain so much knowledge in many new areas. But because we do accept this fact, we may not direct enough attention to the part we must play, if we fulfill our responsibilities, in helping our students learn the many new words that must be added to their high school vocabularies if they are to be successful in college.

But are our students successful in college? All too often, if we face the statistics with which we seem to be constantly bombarded (by those who have the audacity to hold us accountable!), they are not successful. Our drop-out rates are very high. Many students must repeat the same courses several times before they pass them -- if they ever do. We often know our students -- even the "successful" ones -- are not really grasping all they should in order to really master the content of our courses. Perhaps one important reason is that they don't learn the words needed to understand what we say and what we require them to read.

WORDS RELEVANT TO COURSE Many professors assume responsibility for teaching words germaine to their content areas, but do we in reality give our students as much help as they need to master what may be an awesome number of new and difficult terms? Do we depend on our texts' glossaries or our students' abilities to seek out the meanings of words they must know to understand our subject matter? Surely the very least we can do is provide students in each class we teach with a vocabulary list of words particularly relevant to the course and then make sure we define those words clearly in our lectures noting that, "This is one of your vocabulary

words."

VOCABULARY GUIDES FOR TEXTBOOKS Unfortunately, our students' problems with inadequate vocabularies to understand college material is much more serious than not knowing jargon words. Even if we make a systematic effort to define and call attention to words in our content areas, what about the multitude of words the students encounter in their reading assignments, the meaning of which they don't know?

This is a paragraph picked at random from an article in a reader used last year in our second quarter freshman composition class printed omitting the words with which our community college students probably would not be familiar.

> I would not go so far as , who observed that the principal function of language is to conceal our thoughts. But I do think that is one of the important functions of language, and on no account should it be dismissed . environments have and necessary purposes of their own which do not always with the particular and pressing needs of every individual within them. One of the main purposes of many of our environments, for example, is to help us maintain a minimum level of in conducting our affairs. requires not that we deny our feelings, only that we keep them to ourselves when they are not to the situation at hand. Contrary to what many people believe does not teach us that we are "better off" when we express our deepest feelings. He teaches exactly the opposite; that civilization is impossible without . Silence, , , and, yes, even dishonesty can be great virtues, in certain circumstances. They are, for example, frequently necessary in order for people to work together . To learn how to say no is important in achieving personal goals, but to learn how to say yes when you want to say no is at the core of civilized behavior. There is no dishonesty in a baboon cage, and yet, for all that, it holds only baboons.[1]

Frightening, isn't it? But even worse for our students is the fact that there are no blanks; there are letters that they know make words, but because the words have no meaning they look like jibberish.

> I would not go so far as Jomore Pmnskuvoe, who observed that the principal function of language is to conceal our thoughts. But I do think that knpalcawkti is one of the important functions of language, and on no account should it be dismissed laeprlysltope.

> Tkeobwgs environments have keibulwwav and necessary purposes of their own which do not always bgeohase with the particular and pressing needs of every individual within them. One of the main purposes of many of our tkeobwgs environments, for example, is to help us maintain a minimum level of bowhyrqp in conducting our affairs. Bowhyrap requires not that we deny our feelings, only that we keep them to ourselves when they are not bielsmtto to the situation at hand. Contrary to what many people believe, Yowja does not teach us that we are "better off" when we express our deepest feelings. He teaches exactly the opposite; that civilization is impossible without lbiwmtksam. Silence, otubrqaeu, omgqutkal, and, yes, even dishonesty can be great virtues, in certain circumstances. They are, for example, frequently necessary in order for people to work together jfuqeahrinmw. To learn how to say no is important in achieving personal goals, but to learn how to say yes when you want to say no is at the core of civilized behavior. There is no dishonesty in a baboon cage, and yet, for all that, it holds only baboons.[2]

Now wouldn't paragraph after paragraph that looked like that to you make you feel inadequate -- like you "obviously" shouldn't be in college at all? Perhaps this is one reason our students often develop such defeatist attitudes.

To us as professors the passage is very easy to understand simply because we know what the jibberish words mean.

> I would not go so far as Oliver Goldsmith, who observed that the principal function of language is to conceal our thoughts. But I do think that concealment is one of the important functions of language, and on no account should it be dismissed categorically. Semantic environments have legitimate and necessary purposes of their own which do not always coincide with the particular and pressing needs of every individual within them. One of the main purposes of many of our semantic environments, for example, is to help us maintain a minimum level of civility in conducting our affairs. Civility requires not that we deny our feelings, only that we keep them to ourselves when they are not relevant to the situation at hand. Contrary to what many people believe, Freud does not teach us that we are "better off" when we express our deepest feelings. He teaches exactly the opposite; that civilization is impossible without inhibition. Silence, reticence, restraint, and, yes, even dishonesty can be great virtues, in certain circumstances. They are, for example, frequently necessary in order for people to work together harmoniously. To learn how to say no is important in achieving personal goals, but to learn how to say yes when you want to say no is at the core of civilized behavior. There is no dishonesty in a baboon cage, and yet, for all that, it holds only baboons.[3]

If you know your students are experiencing problems like these, do you tell them to do what our college professors told us to do, "Look up the words you don't know!" Do they? And did you?! Unless you're very different from me, your answer is probably at best a tentative, "Sometimes."

Actually, it's totally impractical for students to look up as many words as would probably be necessary for them to understand their reading assignments. The reasons are many. It would take far more time than they could possibly afford to spend on the assignments, especially as in all likelihood their reading rates are laboriously slow in the first place and many have full-time jobs and families making justifiable demands on their time. But even if they were far more conscientious students than most of us were (and chances are good we would not have found it necessary to look up nearly as many words as would today's average college student) and they did look up all those words, they would probably lose the meaning of the passage while bogged down with Webster's!

Even if these were not problems, in many cases students couldn't find or it would be extremely difficult to determine, which definition "fits" the passage. It's harder than you might think to decide even when you know the correct meaning in the first place. Now I could suggest that you "look up" some words in your texts with which your students probably wouldn't be familiar and try to determine the appropriate meanings, but old habits die hard and you probably wouldn't do it, so I'll do it for you.

Take this sentence, for example, from this year's second quarter freshman composition reader at Shelby State.

> But perhaps an even more attractive version of universal national youth service might include private industrial and commercial enterprise.[4]

If the student was not certain of the meanings of the four words underlined and looked them up, these are the definitions he would find in the 1979 revised edition of The Random House College Dictionary.

ver-sion, *n.* 1. a personal or particular account of something, possibly inaccurate or biased. 2. a particular form or variety of something; *a modern version of an antique lamp.* 3. a translation. 4. *Med.* the act of turning a child in the uterus so as to bring it into a more favorable position for delivery. 5. *Pathol.* an abnormal direction of the axis of the uterus or other organ.

in-dus-tri-al, *adj.* 1. of, pertaining to, of the nature of, or resulting from industry. 2. having many and highly developed industries. 3. engaged in an industry or industries. 4. of or pertaining to the workers in industries. 5. fashioned for use in industry. --*n.* 6. an employee in some industry, esp. a manufacturing industry. 7. a company engaged in industrial enterprises. 8. an industrial product. 9. industrials, stocks and bonds of industrial companies. --in-dus'tri-al-ly, *adv.*

com-mer-cial, *adj.* 1. of, pertaining to, or characteristic of commerce. 2. engaged in commerce. 3. prepared, done, or acting with emphasis on salability, profit, or success: *a commercial product; His attitude toward the theater is very commercial.* 4. (of an airplane, airline, or flight) a. engaged in transporting passengers or cargo for profit. b. civilian and public, as distinguished from military or private. 5. not entirely or chemically pure: *commercial soda.* 6. catering especially to traveling salesmen by offering reduced rates, space for exhibiting products, etc.: *a commercial hotel.* --*n.* 7. *Radio and Television.* an announcement advertising or promoting a product. 8. *Brit. Informal.* a traveling salesman. --com-mer'cial'ly, *adv.*

en-ter-prise, *n.* 1 a project, esp. an important or difficult one. 2. a plan for such a project. 3. participation in such projects. 4. dynamic boldness or ingenuity. 5. a company organized for commercial purposes; business firm. -- Syn. 1. plan, undertaking, venture.

Is the point clear now? (And just as a mind-teaser, imagine most students' interpretation of "attractive"!) Perhaps this is asking the unreasonable, you feel, but to give our students the help they need if we are to really <u>teach</u>, they need to be provided with paragraph-by-paragraph vocabulary guides for their texts. Such guides, like the example below which defines the words in the paragraph on communication quoted earlier, would define, in order of occurance each word in each paragraph you assign with which your students may not be familiar.

Oliver Goldsmith -- British poet, novel writer (novelist), and
play writer (playwright) who lived in the 1700's
concealment -- hiding or keeping a secret
categoricially -- without question or unconditionally
Semantic -- language
legitimate -- reasonable or legal

coincide -- match perfectly or agree
civility -- courtesy or consideration or politeness
relevant -- connected with or pertinent
Freud -- famous psychiatrist or doctor who dealt with mental problems by studying emotions, etc.
inhibition -- emotional or mental control of actions, thoughts or emotions
reticence -- reserved, shy, not usually speaking readily or easily
restraint -- control of emotions, etc.
harmoniously -- agreeable, peacefully, friendly[5]

A lot of work for you? Yes! But you call yourself a teacher, don't you? Are you? (I will admit that this is an extreme plan and possibly not feasible with many texts, but many varying levels are available, and any guide would be a definite improvement over no guide.)

I have provided these guides to my Composition II students for each paragraph they read in the course. Testing the technique last spring in two classes using the vocabulary sections of the Nelson-Denny Reading Test, Form C, the first day of classes and the Nelson-Denny Reading Test, Form D, the last day of the ten week quarter, 40 percent of my students' vocabulary scores improved: the average improvement was 3.3 grades (three years, three months). While I would not pretend to assure that such increases would always occur even using my vocabulary guides and the fifty-new-words and brief prefix study (explained below) techniques I employed that quarter, I do know that my students understood their reading assignments far better with my vocabulary guides than they would without this extra help, and their vocabulary scores did improve significantly.

FIFTY NEW WORDS Another excellent way to improve our students' vocabularies is to require them to learn a certain number of new words in our course other than the words on the vocabulary list which we provide of words relevant to our content area. I require fifty words when I use this technique because that's approximately one per day during the quarter and the bookstore has packs of fifty 3" x 5" spiral bound index cards. Using these the students write the new word on one side and

its definition on the other. The collections are held together by the spiral binders, which makes it easier for the students to keep them together, and it also makes my handling of the cards more convenient.

One way to test this requirement is for the instructor to take up the packs of cards about the last week of classes and pick a certain number from each student's pack (I use ten) for the student to define on the last test or final.

While this requires a bit of "busy work" for the instructor during the last hectic days of the quarter, it has at least two distinct advantages: 1) it guarantees (hopefully) that each student will learn fifty new words in the course (quite a feat!) and 2) as it is likely that the students will choose new words from their textbook readings to learn it is likely that they will better comprehend their reading assignments.

PREFIXES Still another simple way to unlock the keys to many new words for students is to call their attentions to prefixes -- even a few. (Suffixes and stems would be great too, but just familiarity with prefixes would work wonders.) We usually don't think about prefixes, but knowing the meanings of common ones would allow our students to understand many, many new words. These are a few examples that should make my point.

in -- not	mono -- one	post -- after	super -- over, above
indefensible	monosyllable	postnatal	superhuman
inhuman	monorail	postgraduate	superman
inattentive	monogamy	postscript	supernatural
invisible	monoplane	postmortem	supersensitive
inconsolable	monocycle	postwar	superabundant
inedible	monopoly	post-secondary	supervisor
incapable	monotheism	postdate	superhighway
inexpensive	monolingual	postnasal	supercargo
involuntary		postpaid	superimpose[6]
inappropriate			

I don't make a "big deal" out of prefixes in my classes, but often when I'm using a word which includes one that is encountered frequently, I try to call students' attentions to it.

CONTEXT CLUES There are several ways a student may be taught to recognize and use context clues as aids in determining the meanings of words unknown to him. But we must take time to teach these techniques to our students. The student should be taught to recognize marks of punctuation as signals that often indicate that a synonym or definition will follow. Marks of punctuation such as commas, dashes, colons, dots, and parentheses often indicate these. The following examples illustrate these signals:

> Hypertension, or high blood pressure, is a common disorder. Sometimes people with hypertension see a cardiologist -- heart doctor. Being obese (fat) does not help hypertension.[7]

> Marx found three laws in the pattern of history. First, *economic determinism:* he believed that economic conditions largely determined other human institutions -- society and government, religion and art. Second, the *class struggle:* he believed that history was a dialectical process, a series of conflicts between antagonistic economic groups . . . the "haves" and the "have-nots" . . . Third, the *inevitability of communism:* he believed that the class struggle was bound to produce one final upheaval that would raise the victorious proletariat over the prostrate bourgeoisie in eternal triumph.[8]

Often definitions or synonyms of words possibly unfamiliar to the reader are given in context; students must be taught to look for and recognize these, such as

> You can help prevent a premature heart attack, one which happens at an early age, by not smoking, avoiding tension or worry, watching your weight, exercising daily and getting a yearly checkup.

Examples which are given in a passage often help a reader determine the meaning of an unknown word, such as

> Outbreaks of contageous diseases such as chicken pox and measles are often difficult to control.

Recognizing the part of speech a particular word is in the sentence may help to determine its meaning in that sentence or passage. Awareness of this principle is often helpful in understanding new uses of familiar words, such as the simple word "run" in these sentences.

That clock always did run fast.
The train made its run on time.
She had a run in her stockings.
Walk, don't run, to the nearest exit.
The newspaper will run the story.
After the final run, the fish was caught.
The spring run of salmon was rather large this year.[9]
He runs to school.
There was a run on the bank.
The sickness runs in the family.
The motor runs well now.
He runs a small business.
The river runs slowly.
The road runs around the mountains.
He hit two runs in the ninth inning.
The boundary line runs along here.
Your bill runs to $27.50.
His nose always runs when he gets a cold.[10]

Visual signals such as chapter titles and sub-topic titles in many texts provide context clues to the reader. Phrases such as "The Results of Imperialism," "The U. S. and Japan Industralize," "Romanticism vs. Realism," and "Problem/Solution Essay" are examples of such visual signals.

Many books and magazines contain pictures, grafts, and charts. Students should learn to use these in determining meanings of unknown words in accompanying passages.

Key words such as "previously," "in addition," "as a result," "first," "second," and "finally" can often help in understanding new words in a particular context. The Marx paragraph quoted above illustrates this.

Students should also be taught to think of an unfamiliar word as "blank" then after reading the entire sentence or possibly passage, go back to the "blank" and try to determine what word they do know that would fit there. Sometimes pure context will enable a reader to determine the meanings of unfamiliar words. Sometimes the tone or general idea or topic of a passage will help the reader understand the meanings of the new words within the passage. Students should also be made aware of this possibility.

A last good context clue students should look for is footnotes. Many texts explain or illustrate difficult concepts and/or words in footnotes, but students need to be encouraged to take advantage of this assistance.

If all else fails in determining the meanings of unfamiliar words within the passage itself, students should be guided to the book's glossary and index for help or to look up the meaning of the word in a dictionary or encyclopedia.

Our students need help in acquiring the vocabularies essential to success in college. If we are to teach, we must accept this responsibility and employ whatever techniques are appropriate in our classes to achieve this all-important goal.

[1]Neil Postman, "The Communication Panacea," Contemporary College Reader (Glenview, Illinois: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1978), pp. 338-339.

[2]Ibid.

[3]Ibid.

[4]Steven Muller, "Our YOuth Should Serve," Patterns for College Writing (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1980), p. 345.

[5]Beverly Norris Griffin, "Workbook on Comp II -- Types of Organization and Development" (Memphis: Shelby State Community College, 1980), p. 32.

[6]Beverly Norris Griffin, "Course Guide for Composition II" (Memphis: Shelby State Community College, 1981), p. 2.

[7]Sherry Royce, Reading Competence (New York: Cambridge Book Company, 1977), p. 20.

[8]Charles M. Brown and W. Royce Adams, How to Read the Social Sciences (Glenview, Illinois: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1968), p. 23.

[9]Selma E. Herr, I-MED Reading Program (Los Angeles: Instructional Materials and Equipment Distributors, 1966), p. 37.

[10]Brown and Adams, op. cit., pp. 22-23.

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